

Food: An Expression of Turkish Culture and Tradition in Elif Shafak's

The Bastard of Istanbul

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In *The Bastard of Istanbul* Shafak has presented characters' interaction with food as an approach to study Turkish cultural values. Her presentation of their everyday usage of food as a communicational source conveys meanings which are more productive and long-lasting than any other cultural source. Shafak handles Turkish food and culinary activities as a symbolic language that addresses the issues of identity and cultural practices. She has presented the family drama through food affiliations set in the events of 1915. The Armenians and Kazancis who dispersed during the genocide in Turkey finally meet in Kazanci Konak in Istanbul and the cultural food plays an important part in alleviating the differences originated in 1915.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul* the sequence of events revolves around the conflicts between two Turkish families, Kazanci in Istanbul, and Armenian scattered in Tucson, Arizona, and San Francisco. The chronicle portrays both families' acceptance and rejection of cultural values through their food choices. The novel is populated with women; old and conservative as well as young and modern, who are most of the time occupied in food and culinary activities. The four generations of Armenians and Kazancis are described through these women's endeavor to maintain their identity, both with being female and with being quintessentially Turkish. Although the family drama deals with a serious moral crime of 'Zeliha's rape', yet it is hard to ignore the permanent charisma of traditional aromas and tastes in the milieu. These food references are constant aides-mémoires of the cautious observance and conveyance of prestigious cultural culinary deliverance from older to younger generation. Shafak conveys this culinary transference through the skills of Grand-ma Shushan and Grand-ma Gulsum.

The blending of different tastes and flavors in Turkish traditional cuisines signifies amalgamation of several Turkish religious and cultural groups. Shafak reflects this aspect through the preparation of ashure by Kazancis and

Armenians. Being Muslims and Christians they have different connotations of ashure, but for both families it is a holy and sacred traditional dessert. Ashure is honored by them to show their association and affiliation with their culture. For them it is "the symbol of continuity and stability, the epitome of the good days to come after each storm, no matter how frightening the storm had been." (p.272) Shafak has deliberately employed the ingredients of ashure to entitle her chapters to convey the underlying importance and connection of her characters with their traditional food and culinary culture. Kazancis and Armenians cook and share ashure with friends and relatives without any discrimination of religious beliefs and class differences. Ashure is a mixture of grains, fruits, dried fruits and nuts and does not contain any kind of meat. This refers to their traditional practice of preventing violence and bloodshed in the society and offering of peace and love to all, especially during the Holy month of Muharrem. This unique ashure sharing is significant of mutually adopted cultural values and it plays an important role by bringing these families closer. This cultural culinary practice of sharing ashure is strictly followed by Kazancis and Armenians at happy as well as sad occasions. One of the most strongly practiced custom is the observance of preparing ashure at funeral. The family of the deceased is not allowed to cook anything at home for about three or four days. At Mustafa's funeral after ashure is served

There was no more cooking in the house...every guest came with a tray of food; the kitchen was jammed with casseroles and saucepans. There was no salt, no meat, no liquor in sight, and no appetizing smells of baked goods. (p.352)

This is how the pain and grief of the family is shared to show that the community stands by them and religious and ethical differences do not count.

According to Balka Sufi tradition ashure refers to the gesture of goodwill and supports the belief of healing power of food for those who are ill or emotionally distressed.

It is prepared with special prayers for health, safety, healing, success and spiritual nourishment. It also signifies the tradition of reunion and the worth of family ties. Shafak presents ashure as a favorite dish that is delightfully shared by all members of both families despite their clashes. For centuries this belief in ashure has travelled through Turkish generations. The elders of the families dutifully convey this cultural message to their young ones in the form of a tale. In *The Bastard of Istanbul* it is Auntie Banu who performs this duty by telling this historical tale to Armanoush, "It was on this day that Allah had accepted Adam's repentance. So was Yunus released by the dolphin that had swallowed him, Rumi encountered by Shams, Jesus taken to the heavens, and Moses given the Ten Commandments" (p.305)

Armenians and Kazancis' passion for food is suggestive of Turkish gaiety and satiation. In both families it is an essentially followed routine to have a plenty of food displayed on tables to enjoy from morning till evening. All Kazanci and Armenian females are expert cooks. They are continuously occupied in cooking healthy and traditional dishes like ashure, manti, dolmas, karniyarik, pilaki, kofte, etc. It is their traditional routine to start a day with healthy and rich kahvalti (breakfast). One of the traditional kahvalti is 'Sucuk'. Banu often calls Asya for kahvalti saying "can't you smell the grilled *sucuk*?" (p.122) 'Simit' is a circular bread with sesame seeds which is specially prepared and served for kahvalti along with cheese, olives, several vegetables, kaymak and Sucuk. Along with that a kahvalti is sure to consist of 'bastirma, borek, pogaca and mememen'. In Kazanci konak it is presented by Banu's routine as she calls and displays kahvalti exactly at six in the morning. "*Simitist! Simitist! Come this way!*" (p.132)

An interesting Turkish cultural practice is to keep two peeled oranges and two sliced apples for the youngest of the family at night as an expression of love. This cultural aspect is presented through Asya and Armanoush. In America Armanoush is regularly offered peeled oranges before going to bed. She experiences the same ritual at Kazancis as Auntie Banu pops in her room and puts the plate next to her laptop, "On the plate were two oranges, peeled and sliced" (p.185) Through these food rituals Shafak exhibits Turks' love and honor for their cultural food values.

. Through the culinary skills of females in both families Shafak portrays Turkish customary practice of preference for a wife who must be well equipped in preparing traditional cuisines. Women in both families are continuously preoccupied in preparing several dishes at home. Among Kazancis (except Zeliha) the sisters are skilled in cooking traditional foods. Their food preferences and culinary practices express their temperaments as well. Banu, the eldest has a "bizarre digestive system that stored

everything ingested" (p.23). She has her own theory regarding bread, "Dinner without bread was a sheer sin, which Allah might forgive, but Banu definitely would not" (p.24). Cevriye, the second eldest is a Turkish national history teacher who "always ate healthy, balanced meals" loves to add 'powdered sugar' to everything and experts in cooking traditional 'dolmas'. There is something bizarre about Feride, the third one whose 'dolmas' burst with "herbs and spices." While she herself is physically over stuffed with diseases of several kinds, she over stuffs whatever she cooks. Her physical hazards are expressed through her haphazard culinary practices. Mustafa's dilemma for being the only existing Kazanci male is also interpreted through his love for ashure and other traditional food. Even Pasha their "silver tabby cat" has "an insatiable hunger" (p.32) for delicious chunks of 'feta cheese'.

The bend of older Turkish generation towards cultural food and culinary practices is manifested in the fourth chapter "Roasted Hazelnuts". Following culinary tradition of celebrations a cake has been ceremoniously baked for Asya by her aunts since last eighteen years, "she is made to eat exactly the same cake---a triple-layer caramelized apple cake (extremely sugary) with whipped lemon cream frosting (extremely sour)" (p.60). Auntie Feride lovingly prepares the traditional meat dish 'manti' and auntie Zeliha reminds "... we Kazancis love red meat! The redder, the greasier, the better!" (p.74). This family's affiliation with their cuisines provides them a sense of belongingness. It also suggests that eating is taken seriously by them and homemade meals are a must. Women who cannot prepare traditional cuisines are awfully criticized as Zeliha and Rose are strongly condemned regarding their culinary mediocrity.

Traditional food plays an important part in Armenian's hatred towards Rose (their daughter-in-law). Her lack of interest in Armenian food is strongly denounced by her in-laws as Auntie Varsenig objects "the only food she knew how to cook was that horrendous mutton barbecue on buns! Each time we came to your house, she would put on that dirty apron and cook mutton." (p.58). They express their dislike by calling her 'Odar and Thorn.' (p.58) For them Rose's kitchen is "a land of variety" (p.58), and she has no special skills of cooking. Their culinary conflicts ultimately result in her divorce. Rose is also not comfortable with Armenian tastes which are different from her American culture and she doesn't hesitate to show it. After her divorce she is determined to "cook real Kentucky dishes" (p.39) for her daughter Armanoush, and promises herself that there will be "No more *patlijan*! No more *sarmas*! No more weird ethnic food! Even the sight of that hideous 'khavourma' twisted her stomach into knots." (p. 39). She assures herself to have a nice meal that will consist of "fried eggs and maple-

syrup-soaked pancakes and hot dogs with onions and mutton barbecue, yes especially mutton barbecue....And instead of that squelchy yogurt drink that she was sick of seeing at every meal, they would drink apple cider!" (p.39) though, interestingly the same food later on attracts Armanoush as Rose marries Mustafa of the Kazanci family who has an adherence to Turkish foods. She marries Mustafa not out of love but because she feels the need of "a lover with no ethnic luggage, no hard-to-pronounce names, and no crowded family; a fresh new lover who would appreciate *garbanzo beans*." (p.39) That is the reason Rose wishes Mustafa to be her 'sweet vengeance', against her former in-laws to show her abhorrence and hatred. Her loathing is so burly that she even switches her daughter's name from Armanoush to Amy.

Rose's conflicts with Armenians and Kazancis are suggested through her culinary relationship with her former and present in-laws. She hates her in-laws as much as they hate her and their mutual hatred is expressed through their food preferences. Rose tries her best to keep Armenian cuisine "as far from the borders of her kitchen as possible" (p.100) She even goes to the extent to vilify their cuisine in front of her neighbors and friends. To her next-door neighbor Mrs. Grinnell she often complains about Armenian's favorite 'cooked calf's feet and stuffed intestines'. Her disgust is intense as she nauseatingly declares "they spice it up with garlic and herbs, stuff it with rice, and wolf it down." (p.100) Rose's hatred for her in-laws is depicted through her loathing for their favorite traditional dishes.

In America, Mustafa often recalls his childhood-favorite-foods cooked specially for him by his mother and sisters whenever he finds Rose making 'pancakes' in her modern kitchen. His passion for his cultural food is obvious as he is terribly irritated when Rose condemns 'stuffed intestines'. He angrily debunks her, "What's the big deal? That sounds just like mumar. You should try it sometimes, it's really good." (p.100) His failure to disconnect himself from his cultural food suggests the impossibility of cutting off from one's roots and origins. Mustafa's adherence to cultural food is suggestive of the Diasporas' tendency towards their origins. It also suggests that food remains a mode of direct transmission of cultural tastes and practices within a familial sphere. Food cultures are characterized by strong parental involvement, while foreign cultural influences can be quickly abandoned due to strong effects of socializing with any other dominating group. (Harris, 1998) as is depicted through Mustafa.

In Turkey people love to eat and relish food. Turkish culinary culture has a long and deep rooted history that signifies the vast inherited elements of Ottoman cuisine, therefore most meals at a typical Turkish home are as grand as a feast (Ana Sortun, *Oldways*). Shafak has

presented it through the dinners served at Armenian and at Kazanci households. At both places the dining tables exhibit full grandeur of Ottoman cuisine such as *manti*, *kaburga*, *ashure*, *kofte*, etc. Besides this Turks are sincerely hospitable. It is a cultural practice and an honor for the family to invite guests and prepare a grand feast for them. It is suggested through the feast prepared by Kazancis for Armanoush to welcome her. It is believed that a guest brings good luck to the host. So when Armanoush visits Istanbul and stays with Kazanci's they welcome her wholeheartedly despite the fact that she is an American Armenian. Zeliha welcomes her expressing comfortably in English "Aren't you hungry? I hope you will enjoy Turkish food" (p.155). The four Kazanci aunts fidget awkwardly due to their unfamiliarity with the English language, still they welcome her with "ear-to-ear smiles on their face." and by preparing a whole feast of traditional cuisine. Armanoush is at once accommodated as she recognizes with interest "What a gorgeous table. She beamed...These are all my favorite foods. I see you have made hummus, baba ghanoush, *yalanci sarma*...and look at this, you have baked *churek*!" (p.156) Armanoush impresses the Kazanci's by identifying their traditional cuisine; *tursu*, *pilaf*, and *kaburga*. She proudly admits, "Actually, I happen to know this food because it is also part of the Armenian cuisine." (p.158) In a ritualistic manner all "the Kazanci women seemed determined not to start supper before the guest of honor joined them." (152). Thus while the dinner is served all of them good-naturedly just sit and watch TV. They wait for Armanoush for more than an hour to wake up. Including Sultan the Fifth (the family cat) no body dines. The cat simply "beseechingly meows" and patiently follows the smell of "lentil soup and meat dish" (p.153) that is repeatedly "reheated after every twenty minutes" (p.153). This episode portrays Turkish tradition of honoring their guests.

The similarity of cultural culinary practices among Turkish and Armenian families is prominent in preparations of their favorite dishes. The episodes regarding Armanoush's visit to her step-father's family in Turkey are indicative of their food similarities which further suggests their mutual sharing of culture and tradition. During one of her dinners with Kazancis, Armanoush notices that the rice is cooked exactly the way her grandmother does, "with butter and sautéed pine nuts." (p.165) while she proudly claims "I do not speak the Turkish language...I speak the Turkish cuisine." (p.156) Speaking of Turkish cuisine refers to the similar cultural food preferences of these two families. It explains Claude Levi-Strauss (1983) idea that "food is a code that can be seen to express patterns about social

relationships". The similarity of their cultural foods bridges their gap of language and distance.

Turks' hospitality is apparent in Kazanci's welcoming of Rose and Mustafa. The whole family is excited and overwhelmed. Grandma Gulsum specially cooks her son's favorite dish ashure, along with several freshly baked 'pastries, oven-baked borek, spinach and feta cheese, simmered lentil soup, stewed lamb chops, and the kofte mixture' which is "to be fried upon the guests' arrival" (p.272) Gulsum is so thrilled that she "incarcerated herself in the kitchen amid the dishware, cutlery, and ingredients, cooking the favorite dishes of her favorite child." (p.271). Her culinary activities are indicative of her extreme love for her son and her adherence to their custom of honoring their guests.

Shafak presents Istanbul as a focal point of Turkish culture through its food and culinary festivities, "hodgepodge of ten million lives. It is an open book of ten million scrambled stories." (p.243). From the very beginning till the end the text is full of food-coated references to enhance the prevailing presence of the city. Even the characters' emotions are linked with the city and expressed through their affiliations with traditional tastes and smells. Through powerful food metaphors Istanbul is portrayed as a comfortable place where even Auntie Banu's djinns can harmonize with the Turkish version of *The Apprentice*. It is the city that takes care of all. Besides imams others who wake up at the dawn in Istanbul are the 'simit vendors' who collect 'sesame bagels' from the bakers to sell throughout the day. The unique combination of religion and food provides another glimpse into the cultural factor of Turkey. Both are permanent presences that are interlinked with each other and also connect people with their cultural roots. Istanbul participates in its populous' happiness as well as anguish like a guardian soul through its food items, edible ingredients and street vendors.

The later part of the narrative drags Istanbul in the family conflict as the bastard of the novel Asya, along with her Turkish-Armenian cousin Armanoush ventures out in the streets of Istanbul to dig out their hidden history. Their Istanbul tour is visibly accompanied by their attraction towards smells and aromas of traditional food-streets and cafes. Armanoush is as comfortable and at ease with Istanbul as she is with Kazancis which is expressed through her food acquaintances. She views Istanbul as a platter full of flavors that are so very familiar to her. There is nothing foreign to her in these aromas. It seems as if the centuries of living together has kneaded these flavors in the genetic material of Turkish inhabitants making it impossible for them to throw these out of their composition. Strolling through Istanbul streets with Asya she inhales:

a pungent whiff of the sea. This city was a jumble of aromas, some of them strong and rancid, others sweet and stimulating. Almost every smell made Armanoush recall some sort of food, so much so that she had started to perceive Istanbul as something edible. (p.246)

So Armanoush confesses while eating 'chicken doner' that "Istanbul is a bit different... It's more modern and less conservative." (p.181) Istanbul is desired by these young women as a romantic and enchanting heaven that lures and swallows them by its beauty. Armanoush is mesmerized by the beauty of the sea, the way seagulls shriek to catch the morsels of 'simit' that are thrown to them by the passengers, and the acrobatic performance of the ferry passengers as they jump off before it reaches the dock. It is relatively easy to witness here the deep metaphoric connotations of the city, the fish, the simit and the fishermen. While these metaphors construct and sustain the identities of people and their social and cultural boundaries, they also echo their behaviors. This suggests that while fulfilling appetite Istanbulian food also provides information about the cultural and traditional aspects.

The cultural cuisine and food items mentioned in *The Bastard of Istanbul* not only illustrate the quality and style of Turkish society but also highlight social bondage. Shafak engages food metaphors as codes that define character's place in their social circle (both inside and outside home) while illustrating their taste. In *The Bastard of Istanbul* food references illustrate characters' outdoor ventures such as Zeliha's search for peace, Asya's escape from her Aunties, Rose's conflicts with her in-laws, Auntie Feride's emotional attachment with her ex-husband, Auntie Banu's fortune telling, Grand-ma Shushan's nostalgia, Grand-ma Gulsum's forgetfulness, Mustafa's escape from reality and finally Armanoush's struggle to solve the *janissary paradox*. All these incidents show the affiliations and associations of these people with Turkish traditional values. The background of these incidents is Istanbul and the connecting route is full of tastes and aromas of traditional cuisine.

Armanoush is connected with Istanbul via internet from America. On internet she develops an intellectual relationship with a group called 'Café Constantinopolis'. The group forces her back to Istanbul to dig her inheritance. She takes a decision to go as she "munched the last bit of her apple, feeling a rush of adrenaline about her dangerous decision." (p.120). During her stay in Istanbul Armanoush continuously informs her friends about her adventures. When Zeliha takes her to a stylish but convivial 'tavern' to show her a typical Turkish style of enjoying an evening and asks her "why don't you surprise us again with your culinary

vocabulary?” Armanoush surprises her by telling the names of the dishes served “*yalanci, sarma, tourshi, patlijan, topik, enginar...*” (p.252) Armanoush not only finds cultural familiarity in Kazanci domicile, but also outside the house, among Istanbulites. She realizes that in spite of several years of distance the Armenians and Kazancis are still connected and their common route is traditional food. She is greeted in Café Kundera “Welcome to Istanbul!...Do you like the city? Do you like the food?” (p.201) It looks as if Istanbulites want her to be bewitched by the romantic beauty of their city while relishing the aromas of its traditional cuisine. As she enters in the ‘tavern’ ‘it was precisely then that Armanoush felt the pulse of the city for the first time since she had arrived in Istanbul.’ (257). When the Gypsy musicians sing and play their instruments: *an ud, a clarinet, a kanun, and a darbuka*” (p.256) she realizes “why and how people could fall in love with Istanbul” (p.257). In spite of sorrows that it casts upon its people, Istanbul is still willing to embrace all groups in its peaceful cuddle. Istanbul welcomes Armanoush as a long lost friend and offers her a sanctuary, just as it did to its inhabitants during the massacre of 1915.

The ‘Pomegranate brooch’ and the hand-carved ‘walnut desk’ that Hovhannes Stambouljian buys from the Jewish antique dealer from the Grand Bazar of Istanbul (before the chaos of the massacre in 1915) are symbols of Turkish cultural heritage. ‘Pomegranate’ and ‘walnut’ have hard covers that provide protection to their cores. The organic metaphors of pomegranate and walnut suggest that Istanbul and Istanbulites vigilantly preserve their cultural heritages as these still exist in Armenian and Kazanci families and symbolize their adherence to similar cultural roots. The way this cultural heritage survives through the havocs of massacre and civil war is suggestive of these families’ success in preserving their cultural values. Auntie Banu the ‘Walnut Sufi’ represents the true Turkish spirit by keeping the ‘Pomegranate Brooch’ as its eligible heir. This metaphorically refers to Hovhannes’ attempt to secure the ‘pomegranate brooch’ in the drawer of ‘walnut’ desk to be found by his wife Armanoush. The way ‘the pomegranate brooch’ is protected by the desk and delivered to its heirs, Banu also as a ‘Walnut Sufi’ protects and delivers it to Armanoush. Banu’s handing over of the ‘golden pomegranate brooch’ to Armanoush at the end refers to the transfer of responsibilities by an authorized adult to his/her young one. It also suggests the confidence that Banu has in Armanoush as her heir.

Similar is the case with tea glasses which Zeliha buys from the Grand Bazar of Istanbul the day she goes for her abortion. After twenty years, after the death of Mustafa, after the truth is revealed to Asya and much later when Armanoush’s quest for Janissary’s Paradox is over, Zeliha

offers Aram tea in the same tea glasses, “they live to tell the tale, after all. Even tea glasses do!” (p.357) and then Istanbul intervenes as it starts raining bringing along with it “the sundry smells of the sea, growing grass, and the yet-to-blossom almond flowers of Istanbul.” (p.357). ‘The Pomegranate Brooch, walnut desk and tea-glasses’ are metaphors for delicate cultural legacies that are carefully handled and transferred from one generation to the next.

Mustafa is warmly welcomed at Istanbul after twenty years of his absence. He feels at ease in his birth-place and courageously decides to accept the naked truth of his life. He has tried to run away as far as possible from his past; his home, family and Istanbul. The metaphor of ‘Pomegranate seeds’ also refers to his scattered life, he being the dislocated seed who is finally settled. On his return it is his bastard daughter Asya who “grabbed a handful of pomegranate seeds to sprinkle on the still-undecorated bowls to the side. She scattered the seeds evenly, as if leaving behind a trail of marks to guide some star-crossed fable child homeward.” (p.306) ironically she herself is Mustafa’s poisonous and evil seed. The past that tortured him all through his life brings him back to his present. As a young man he “abhorred the carnal cravings of his body...” (p.312) that took him to the most infamous prostitutes’ street in Istanbul from where he always returns “feeling filthy and weak.” (p.314) That is why on his return home he spends most of his time at home, reading Turkish newspaper “trying to catch up with the country he had left.” (p.330) and along with Rose spends “first two days in Istanbul eating.” (p.330) as if consuming Istanbul and summoning up the courage to face the tragic truth. Banu helps him in making the difficult decision as she herself brings the ‘poisonous ashure’ for him. He believes his prayers are accepted and to end his disturbing conflict between amnesia and remembering he eats ashure “Knowingly and willfully.” In this way ashure helps him in accepting his death and his sin of raping his own sister.

After his death the Kazanci women take his body to the mosque. There they ‘scrubbed, swabbed and rinsed’ his body with paradisiacal green ‘daphne soap’. In a procession led by his hearse they bring him back to Kazanci domicile and perform all the cultural funeral rituals; spoonful of ‘Holy Mecca water’ is poured in his mouth, ‘sandalwood’ incense is burned, an imam recites from Holy Quran, a performer woman wails loudly and ashure is cooked and served to the guests. Holy water, sandalwood and ashure are traditional holy ingredients and as metaphors they suggest the hope for Holy merci and forgiveness for all. The preparation of ashure at Mustafa’s funeral suggests the observance of the legacy of this cultural culinary practice in Turkey.

In this way Shafak’s employment of food references in *The Bastard of Istanbul* provide an understanding of

Kazanci's and Armenian's love and respect for their traditional cuisine. These two families are presented as examples of several Turkish religious groups who share the bondage of similar cultural cuisine. Shared culinary heritage helps them in understanding and respecting each other's emotions and feelings.

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